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ABSTRACT

A study examined the reading practices in various secondary content classrooms. As part of assigned observations in secondary schools, students in three sections of an undergraduate class in secondary teaching methodology which included a literacy component were instructed to complete a data sheet for each class they observed. Observations from 38 English classrooms and 60 history/social studies classrooms (most in urban and suburban Rhode Island) were analyzed. Results indicated that: (1) textbooks were almost always present in 80% of the classrooms observed; (2) three-fourths of the time the textbooks were used during the class; (3) supplementary text materials were noticeably absent, even in English classes; (4) reading took place in about one-half of the classrooms; and (5) 43% of the history/social studies teachers and 65% of the English teachers provided some kind of prereading preparation and/or purpose setting for assigned reading. Findings provide further evidence that educators should be concerned about how text is used in high school classrooms and question the effects of school policy decisions and some traditional instructional practices on the development of literacy. (RS)

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Developing Mature Readers for the 21st Century: Are Secondary Content Classrooms Helping?

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. Developing Mature Readers for the 21st Century:

Are Secondary Content Classroom Helping?

In his book The Scribal Society: An Essay on Literacy and Schooling in the Information Age, Alan C. Purves (1990) develops the thesis that we are in the process of returning to a scribal society --one in which relative few people manage the society because they have control of the information and its flow. In previous scribal societies, the scribes were literate and other people were not; in the scribal society into which Purves contends we are moving, most people have a some ability to read and write; the "scribes" are mature readers who have the knowledge and the more sophisticated literacy skills required for decision making and management in the "Information Age." Certainly results for in-school seventeen- year olds from the National Assessment of Educational Progess lend some support for his belief; consistently the NAEP results have shown that most students have developed basic literacy skills by this age, while less than half have developed advanced skills and even fewer demonstrated top-level or "adept" performance (Mullis et al, 1991.)

In the latest NAEP effort, reported in 1992, an attempt was made to look at factors influencing reading development, and a major conclusion was that while the amount of reading students do both for school (in school and homework) and out-of-school is positively related to their reading achievement, students report doing relatively little reading in either situation (Foertsch,

1992). Among twelfth graders, three-quarters reported doing some reading for school daily, but a tenth did so monthly or even less often. Only about a fourth of the twelfth graders reported reading literature for school assignments on a daily basis while 44 percent did such reading monthly or even less frequently. The essential message of this report is simply that students are not going very much reading, but those who attain higher levels of reading achievement are those who read more.

Who can be surprised? Whether it is viewed as a basic psychological tenet or just common sense -- people become better performers of any skill through practice. Of course, quality of practice makes a difference too, but mere quantity has its effect. I have been concerned about how much reading was actually going on in secondary schools for some time. Experiences with two populations of college students have given reason to question the amount and quality of reading actually done by many students in their high school courses. First, during my fifteen years as a specialist in college developmental reading programs, many students had reported that although they had received good grades in high school classes, they had seldom needed to complete assigned readings to succeed. Secondly, both graduate and undergraduate teacher education students in elementary and content reading courses have reported similar experiences. No wonder their reading often seemed inmature; many had not read much advanced material.

It had seemed to me that if students were reading much of anything in high school they were most likely to be reading textbooks. After all, John Goodlad (1984) found textbooks to be the focus of 75% of the instruction his reseach team observed in their extensive observations in secondary schools. Woodword and Elliot, in a NSSE Yearbook article, declared that textbooks were "ubiquitous and widely used" (1990, p. 178). However, I also knew from research done by Rieck (1977) and by Smith and Feathers (1983) that the way content teachers sometimes "use" text does not necessarily lead to student reading. Indeed, Hinchman (1987), in her case studies of three content teachers, concluded that while all three used texts as information sources for themselves and their students, they frequently conducted instruction in ways that communicated to students that they needn't read either to perform well on tests or to learn needed material.

The issue becomes more complicated when textbook appropriateness and quality are brought into the picture. It seems apparent that some of those textbooks that aren't being read either don't deserve reading because of content flaws or are so poorly designed and written that they make reading extremely difficult (Tyson & Woodward, 1989). But is poor textbook quality an adequate excuse for not engaging secondary school students in meaningful, substantial reading in most content areas?

As reading educators, we have attempted to address the issues of reading in secondary classrooms and of developing mature readers through the "Reading in the Content Area" movement, and, while Content Reading courses have been mandated in a majority of states, preservice and inservice secondary content teachers still show considerable resistence to these courses and the practices recommended in them (O'Brien & Stewart, 1992). Reading the literature documenting the resistance was not a suprise to me -- a former secondary English and communications teacher who had been every bit as resistant as any of my colleagues. But, positive experiences in a content reading course changed my mind and my practices, and, in my current incarnation as a reading education professor in a department of secondary education, I had the opportunity to help determine how a state "reading in the content area" requirement would be implemented in our programs. Our decision was to integrate content reading with basic teaching methods in a course titled "Dimensions of Secondary Education." My naive hope was that students in this course would come to view incorporation of content reading and writing practices as just "part of the regular routine" in the secondary classroom if were presented this way in their training. What I was ignoring, of course, was "the wisdom of experience"--the powerful cultural influence of conventional practice within specific disciplines and within secondary schools in general (O'Brien & Stewart, 1990).

In the "Dimensions of Secondary Education" course, students were required to make classroom observations in secondary schools and to write detailed accounts of the instruction they saw in classes. The presence of textbooks, supplementary text materials, and reading was rarely mentioned in these reports. Perhaps these student observers were just not attending to reading and reading materials within the classroom? To learn more about what was happening in these classes and to focus my students' attention on literacy practices, I asked my students, over a period of two semesters, to join with me as researchers to help describe the reading practices in the various secondary content classrooms in which they observed.

Methods

As part of assigned observations in secondary schools, students in three sections of an undergraduate class in secondary teaching methodology which includes a literacy component were instructed to complete a data sheet for each class they observed. The students were told to record only what they saw and/or heard going on during the period they observed. That is, they were not to be concerned about whether what they saw was typical practice; they were simply to provide a "snapshot record" of what occurred regarding texts and reading during that class period.

Most of the observations took place in schools in urban and suburban Rhode Island with a few done in schools in nearby

Massachusetts and Connecticut. Students were asked to visit an urban school for one of their three observations; otherwise, the choice of site was left up to them. Students observed in English, history and social studies, mathematics, science, and industrial technology classes in grades 8 through 12. However, since there were fewer classes observed in last three areas (science - 15, mathematics - 23, and industrial technology - 8), and since, with the exception of the reading of mathematics problems and of laboratory manuals, reading was virtually absent in these classes, I will only report the results of observations in English (N = 38) and history/social studies (N = 60) classes in this paper. Certainly these are two subject areas in which the reading of textbooks and supplementary materials traditionally has been a major part of instruction.

I examined the observation sheets in conjunction with each student's written account of the observation for purposes of clarifying and verifying information. Then the data was compiled to provide a picture of the presence and use of text materials in these classes.

Results

Four types of information were gained from the observation sheets: a) Did students have textbooks and did teachers refer to the textbook during instruction? b) Were other reading materials besides textbooks used in the classes? If so, what were these? c) Did any reading actually occur during the class session?

If so, did the teacher or the students read, and was student reading oral or silent? d) Was any reading assigned for homework? If so, how was that assignment made?

Sixty history/social studies classes were observed; in 78%, all or most students appeared to have a class textbook in their possession; in only 8% (5 classes) were there few or no textbooks. Of those 55 classes in which textbooks were in evidence, teachers referred to them "frequently" 25% of the time; "occasionally", 51% of the time; and "never", 24% of the time. In only 30% of the classes were other reading materials in evidence. Most frequently these materials were described as "dittos," "worksheets," "workbooks," or "teacher-constructed outlines"; in only 10% (n=6) of the classes did there appear to be substantive, sustained text materials other than textbooks in use.

In 23% of the history/social studies classes, the teacher read to the students, generally for about 5 to 10 minutes. Students themselves read in 44% of the classes; In 17% of the classes, students read silently, in another 17% they read orally, and in 10% of the classes, both types of reading were observed. Oral reading was about equally divided between teacher-assigned and volunteer reading. The median amount of time spend reading was 15 minutes.

One-half of these history/social studies teachers made reading assignments to their classes. Only 27% did this by merely providing page or chapter numbers; forty-three percent did some kind of pre-reading preparation and/or established a purpose for

reading. One-half either assigned textbook questions or provided other study questions. While the likelihood of a reading homework assignment was fairly consistent across grade and ability levels, there was a noticeable difference between urban and suburban schools; in urban schools, reading was assigned in only 37% of the classes (7 of 19); in suburban schools, it was assigned in 56% of the classes (23 of 41).

Thirty-eight English classes were observed; 14 were urban, and 24 were suburban. In 82% of these classes, all or most students had textbooks. In the 32 classrooms in which textbooks were found, teachers referred to the text "frequently" 44% of the time, "Occasionally" 27% of the time, and "Never" 25% of the time. Observers saw other reading materials in 47% of these classes; however, these materials were most frequently worksheets, puzzles, or dictionaries; in only 5 cases (13%) were these texts novels or other works of literature.

In 45% of these English classes, the teachers read to their students from 5 to 40 minutes with an median teacher reading time of 10 minutes. In 47% of these observations, students read in class both orally and silently in about equal amounts (about 15 minutes.) Silent reading was observed in 24% of these English classes. Once again, student oral reading was almost equally divided between volunteers and teacher assignment.

In 53% of these English classes, reading assignments were made. Only 24% of the teachers made these assignments by merely

providing page numbers or title; 65% provided some prereading or purpose setting activity, and 24% assigned book questions or other study questions to be answered. As with the history/social studies classes, there was a difference between urban and suburban schools in this category. Reading assignments were made in only 21% (3 of 14) of classes observed in urban schools. In contrast, reading assignments were made in 58% of the English classes in suburban schools.

Discussion

The study was undertaken to provide an estimate of how much actual reading is being done in secondary content classrooms based on the assumption that mature reading skills are developed when practice in using them occurs, and the conclusion from the NAEP report (Foertsch, 1992) that frequency of reading is correlated with reading achievement.

Textbooks were almost always present in 80% of the English and history/social studies classes observed. Three-fourths of the time they were used during the class, at least to the degree that teachers made occassional or frequent reference to them. Supplementary text materials other than such materials as worksheets, workbooks, and puzzles were noticeably absent, even in English classrooms -- with works of literature beyond the course textbook being used in only 13% of the classes.

The amount of reading actually going on in class as perceived by the student observers was somewhat higher than was anticipated

based on the written observations of previous students. In about one-half of these classrooms there was some reading being done. In about a quarter of the classes, some time was spent in silent reading. An equal number of incidents of oral reading were reported -- at least half of it of the "round robin," teacher-assigned variety. More English teachers read to their students (45%) than did history/social studies teachers (23%).

Only about half of the teachers in either content area made class assignments that entailed reading. It was encouraging to find that only a quarter of these assignments were made by merely providing page number or title; 43% of the history/social studies teachers and 65% of the English teachers provided some kind of pre-reading preparation and/or purpose setting for the assigned reading. Less encouraging was the fact that reading assignments were given much less frequently in urban schools, especially in the English classes.

This research obviously has some limitations; the observers were students with very limited training in classroom observation, and the observations were made in a very limited geographic area. Further, the "snap-shot of one class" approach to describing classroom instruction provides no insight into the quality of the reading activities that are taking place, in or out of class. In-class silent reading can be a time-filler that neither teacher or students take seriously, and assigning reading can be a meaningless routine; one observer in an English class reported that students

said that they never bothered to read what the teacher assigned because they knew that the teacher would begin the next class period by summarizing the assigned material. Conversely, excellent instruction preparing for and motivating subsequent literacy activities might well take place with no text materials in evidence.

Considered, however, in conjunction with the relatively small amount of reading many students reported in the NAEP study, this study provides further evidence that we have reason for concern. If students who read more achieve a higher level of reading proficiency, and if we want more high school graduates with higher-order literacy instead of the smaller "scribal class" that Purves (1990) predicts, we have reason to be concerned about how text is used in high school classrooms, and to question the effects of school policy decisions and some traditional instructional practices on the development of literacy. For example, what difference would it make -- in terms of the amount of reading students do --if less money were spent on traditional textbooks and teachers had more opportunity to select and use appropriate supplementary texts?

As reading educators, we need to consider seriously recommendations to modify content area reading courses in ways that will address this concern; O'Brien & Stewart (1992), for example, suggest, "that less time be spent demonstrating and modeling strategies and more time showing how instructional frameworks

associated with content reading fit into the existing culture and curricula of secondary schools." (1992, p. 35) Assignments that involve observations in secondary content classrooms and interviews with content area teachers and students about reading practices might be teamed with readings such as the Purves book and the NAEP reports so that the role of content area instruction in literacy development might be confronted and explored.

Finally, reading educators need to reexamine our programs for the preparation of K-12 reading specialists. Many students in reading specialist programs are elementary teachers whose experiences and training have not provided them with either the theoretical or the experiential base for understanding and dealing with the culture of secondary schools and secondary content area teachers. If we want well-informed reading specialists who can work collaboratively with content teachers and who can shape school policy dealing with all levels of literacy development, we need to make sure that we adequately address the social, political, cultural, and instructional issues related to higher-order literacy.

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